CHASING THE SUN
AN ORPHAN'S JOURNEY HOME

Part One

Twin adoptees search for their Korean roots

Courtnay Peifer and her twin sister, Lindsay, came to the U.S. 25 years ago as adoptees from Korea. Three years ago, they started on a quest to find out what they could about the Korean relatives they had left behind. This is the story of their quest.

Their mission was to adopt Korean orphans

As Oregon parents Harry and Bertha Holt were creating Holt International Children's Services to help other American families adopt Korean children -- eventually 60,000 -- the South Korean government began formalizing the adoption process overseas, something that was culturally unheard of before the 1950-53 war.

Part Two

A joyful surprise on the phone

P-I reporter Courtnay Peifer, adopted at 3 and relocated to Minnesota from her native South Korea, spent three years looking for her birth relatives without success. It took a Korean acquaintance three hours to find them.

A moment with ... Elliott Kim, state Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs

Commissioner Elliott Kim of the State of Washington Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs became the crucial link to reunite two American women with their Korean family.

A moment with ... Lt. Kwon Teh-il, Korean National Police

Korean National Police Lt. Kwon Teh-il, a 29-year police veteran, is the section chief of the white-collar crimes unit at Daegu West Metropolitan Police Department. Kwon and his wife have three children.

Part Three

Emotion-filled family reunion for twins

SEOUL -- Courtnay and Lindsay Peifer return to South Korea after nearly 25 years to meet relatives they can't remember, and begin learning about their past.

Thoughts and musings on finding family, roots

Family. It is the root of all of us. It is our foundation. Yet, where is the line drawn?

With one phone call – lives forever altered

When I hung up the phone with Commissioner Elliott Kim, it was 2:45 a.m., 4:45 a.m. in Minnesota where my twin sister, Lindsay, and my parents live. I started pacing.

Short Takes: Rules of the road

Here are the rules in Seoul: Pedestrians must avoid cars and motorcycles whether the vehicles are driving on the road, on the sidewalk or in the crosswalk. The driver's obligation to the pedestrian: They must take any pedestrians they hit -- though it is the pedestrian's responsibility to avoid being hit -- to the hospital.

Kim Jong Soon and Kim Jong Sun, photographed in an orphanage in Seoul, were given up for adoption by their family after their father died and their mother abandoned the family. They are now Lindsay and Courtnay Peifer, searching for their roots in a land they barely knew.

Family Tree, American: See a recent photo of Courtnay Peifer's American family, along with a short biography of each member. (appendix A1)

Family Tree, Korean: See a photo of Courtnay Peifer's Korean family, taken before she was born, along with a short biography of each member. (appendix A2)

Part Four

One land connects two fathers

DAEBU ISLAND, South Korea -- A farmer dies and a soldier survives to take his place. Two fathers cleaved by half a world, but their fates intersect in Korea.

Short Takes: Can't sleep? Go shopping

Dongdaemun, or "east big gate," comes from the era when Seoul was protected by walls and guards watched over the city at stone gates. Today, it has shopping centers -- about 30,000 vendors -- open until 8 a.m.

Part Five

Coming home with losses healed

Courtnay and Lindsay Peifer end their journey of reconnection to family in South Korea and return to the U.S., fighting to understand the meaning of home.

Help for adoptees

Here is a list of organizations, support groups and other forums for Korean adoptees.

Short Takes: Stair masters

I initially wondered how everyone stays so thin in Korea with so much tasty food. Then I hit the subway. As simple as the subway is to navigate, it takes some effort.

SOURCE: SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, AUGUST 2003

Part One

Monday, August 18, 2003

Twin adoptees search for their Korean roots

By COURTNAY PEIFER
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

My sister and I were orphans. Somber identical twins, our names pinned to our cotton dresses as fragile as hope.

"You looked so scared," says Mom, recalling her first impressions of photos the adoption agency sent to her and Dad. "That's what I remember -- that and I fell in love right away."

Family Tree, American: See a recent photo of Courtnay Peifer's American family, along with a short biography of each member. (appendix A1)

It's been 25 years since death and poverty conspired to change my fate and that of my sister. A quarter-century filled with opportunity and laughter since two 3 1/2-year-old Korean girls became Americans in the heartland of Minnesota.

And now, that is how I will return to the land of my birth, as an American -- as a foreigner.

I will return to connect with a forgotten culture, and to find the grave of my birth father, whose death triggered an avalanche of events, and to find what I can about the three older siblings who remained behind.

I will search for a family of Kims.

Kim, Lee and Park, the most common surnames, have ancient origins and account for 40 percent of Korea's population. It is not like looking for a needle in a haystack. It is more like trying to find three specific grains of sand in the Gobi desert.

Family Photo

Kim Jong Soon and Kim Jong Sun, photographed in an orphanage in Seoul, were given up for adoption by their family after their father died and their mother abandoned the family. They are now Lindsay and Courtnay Peifer, searching for their roots in a land they barely knew.

I do not remember my older sister's name. But I have the names of my two brothers, gleaned from school records. We will search in Seoul, a city of about 13 million people -- a search that could expand to 48 million people in a nation known for its homogeneity, a nation in which only about 250 surnames exist.

Finding home

I was born Kim Jong Sun, which means gold, comfort and goodness. It is a wish for my future.

My sister Lindsay was born Kim Jong Soon -- gold, comfort and mildness.

As children, Lindsay was quick to cry and I hurried to catch her tears. She was -- and still is -- quick to laugh, an explosive, corruptible sound like bursting champagne. She is feisty and fiery and witty, a marathon away from mildness.

Perhaps Minnesota, with its extremes of cold and hot weather, shouldn't be expected to raise mildness. Goodness perhaps, but certainly not mildness.

Minnesota is where I arrived in 1978, with only the gold pantsuit set and sneakers that I was wearing -- purchased with money sent by my new parents.

Family Photo

Bob and Dar Peifer get to know their daughters, whom they name Lindsay and Courtnay. Also pictured is their sister Ashley, adopted in 1976, and a cousin.

At 3 1/2, it was my sixth placement, but this is where I would stay, where I would find a home with real parents and another sister, Ashley, who was adopted from Korea in 1976. Parents who would each spend two hours every night before bed tending my lice and impetigo, a skin disease, and Lindsay's ear infection and mites; who endured the current events tests I drilled on them after scavenging the newspaper when I was 5; who cheered and applauded after impromptu concerts that Lindsay, Ashley and I would give, sometimes on roller skates and always off key.

My biological father died Dec. 30, 1976, after he was bitten by a snake. My adoption records say my biological mother then abandoned all five of her children -- ages 2, 5, 9, 12, -- with my father's younger brother, who was married and had his own children. He kept us for a year, but couldn't afford all of us.

He brought the two youngest to a babies' home in hopes for a better life for us. The orphanage sent us to an adoption agency, which placed us with a foster mother while we waited for a permanent home.

Family Photo

Courtnay and Lindsay take a spin at Como Park in Minneapolis, Minn.

A few months later my sister and I landed at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport with a dozen or so other Korean adoptees. The terminal lights were shocking after

hours spent sleeping in a dim airplane. I remember cameras flashing and video cameras and everywhere a sea of legs. And noise.

Adoptees were carried in the momentum of the crowd of new parents surrounded by relatives and friends. Many of the adoptees had medical issues, the worst being a girl whose new parents discovered -- through her shrieks and tears -- that she had a broken arm.

"I found one," called Mom, scooping me up in her arms. "Can anyone see the other one?"

"Which one do you have?" Dad asked Mom.

"I think I see the other one," Mom's brother said.

What I remember most is that I was tired. I curled up in my new mother's arms, not yet knowing who she was, but somehow knowing she was safe. I pretended to sleep so I could nestle in her arms, the sheltering weight of her hand cradling my head.

Moments later, the interpreter told me that this was my new mother. I looked at the woman holding me and hugged her. I fell in love right away.

When my Dad, who was holding Lindsay, thought he should get to know me and let my Mom get to know Lindsay, I refused to budge.

I had found home and I wasn't letting go.

Family Photo

New citizens Lindsay, Ashley and Courtnay display their new flag in 1979.

The quest

I moved to Seattle last year, but still think of home as my parents' dining room table in the St. Paul suburb of Apple Valley. That's where hot games of Scrabble unfold, where discussion about the legacy of feminism and the future of politics are debated over pots of coffee, where Dad eats his morning toast and tells stories in a slow rhythm that end in the funniest punch line you've heard since his last story.

While I don't expect to find a home in Seoul, I wonder whether the soil will feel familiar, an artifact to a cultural amnesiac. Will the shards of images that I retain translate into a language of memory?

I have spent years, even as they have collected as incremental steps toward my inevitable journey back to South Korea, cautioning myself that I may not be able to find my relatives or they may not want to be found.

I started looking for them 3 1/2 years ago. I've contacted Children's Home Society of Minnesota, which handled my adoption. They would forward my request, but just one case worker processes all such requests at Eastern Child Welfare Society, the Korean adoption agency. Children's Home warned that it may take two years just for my file to advance to the top of the pile.

Family Photo

Days after their arrival, Courtnay and Lindsay collect grass from their yard.

I've met with a consul and the consul general at the Korean Consulate in Seattle. Both said they were eager to help press my inquiry through formal channels.

Lindsay looked into appearing on a Korean television show during which adoptees tell their stories in the hopes that a family will recognize them.

I've looked on the Internet. I investigated buying a "seeking-family" ad in Korean newspapers.

But sometimes a code breaker arrives in an unexpected place. Sometimes it takes only three hours for someone to change your life.

Short Takes: The story of an age

Think getting older is tough? Try gaining two years in one. Here's the tally:

I'm 28. According to the Western calendar, I was born Feb. 7, 1975.

According to the lunar calendar, I was born Dec. 27, 1974. OK, still 28.

However, in Korea, two things happen. First, the clock starts ticking at age 1. That makes me 29. Second, while the lunar calendar is observed, birthdays aren't. Everyone jumps a year, regardless of actual birthday, on Jan. 1.

Thus, this December, I will technically turn 30 on the lunar calendar according to Korean bookkeeping and still be considered 28 in the United States. However, I won't officially be considered 30 in Korea until Jan. 1.

But a month later, I'll turn 29 again in the United States. And then turn 31 at the end of the year in Korea.

So when some people talk about turning 30 over and over again, I actually do -- three times.

-- Courtnay Peifer

Monday, August 18, 2003

Their mission was to adopt Korean orphans

Holts were moved to act, changing a nation in the process

By COURTNAY PEIFER
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Harry and Bertha Holt took a personal mission and inspired a nation.

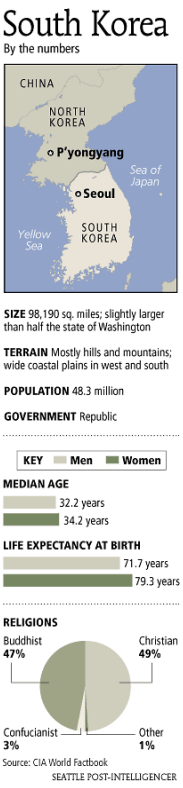
After building a fortune in lumber, farming and commercial fishing, the Oregon parents of six were so moved after watching a documentary about Korean War orphans that they decided to adopt eight of them.

But international adoptions were nearly unheard of in 1955. While Harry Holt went to Korea, Bertha Holt lobbied Congress, which passed the Holt bill, allowing them to adopt the children.

The children's arrival brought media attention, which sparked families nationwide to seek Korean children. Many were called "dust of the streets," biracial with U.S. military fathers stationed in Korea during the war.

As the Holts were creating Holt International Children's Services to help other American families adopt Korean children -- eventually 60,000 -- the South Korean government began formalizing the adoption process overseas, something that was culturally unheard of before the 1950-53 war. Before then, any adoptions usually occurred within the family line.

Over the next several decades South Korea became the largest supplier of children to developed countries.



What started with the adoption of war orphans morphed into a system that became the primary social policy for children abandoned by impoverished families in the 1950s and 1960s.

In a reflection of changing social norms, most adopted Korean children in the 1970s and 1980s came from single mothers just as more Americans were having abortions and gaining access to more reliable birth control methods.

About 200,000 South Korean children have been adopted overseas with the vast majority -- 150,000 -- by American families. The other 50,000 have been adopted by families in Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, France, Germany and Luxembourg.

In Washington state, World Association for Children and Parents has placed more than 2,000 children since 1976.

Children's Home Society of Minnesota, the state's main adoption agency for Korean adoptees and which handled our case, has given families to 8,000 such children in the past 30 years. Holt International, based in Eugene, Ore., operates nationwide, including in Minnesota. Holt placed 339 children in 2001 nationwide, Children's Home Society places about 150 in Minnesota and western Wisconsin a year.

South Korea began to face international pressure to reform its social welfare programs to create domestic safety nets for its children and not rely on international adoptions. In its peak year, nearly 9,000 children were adopted overseas in 1985 alone. By 1993, that number had dropped to fewer than 1,800. The government mandated that overseas adoptions cease by 1996, but social and economic challenges prompted a softening of the policy and foreign adoptions started to increase after 1997.

Part Two

Tuesday, August 19, 2003

A joyful surprise on the phone

By COURTNAY PEIFER
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

The phone call in the middle of the night.

That call that sounds the moment when your life irrevocably changes, when you can bisect your life into the before and the after.

My call came at 2:45 a.m.

"I'm sorry to call you so late, but I have very exciting news," said Elliott Kim, a member of the Washington Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs.

Kim said his friend, Lt. Kwon Teh-il of the Korean National Police, "had tried his best to find my relatives" -- and he had.

I had been looking for three years without success. It took Kwon three hours.

Two weeks before we were set to go to Seoul to search for three siblings, Kwon had located them. My older

Family Tree, Korean: See a photo of Courtnay Peifer's Korean family, taken before she was born, along with a short biography of each member. (appendix A2)

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay, left, and Lindsay Peifer didn't know the name of the sister who remained in Korea, and now they are talking to her on the phone. "I can't thank God enough that you're still alive," their sister Kim Jong Sook said through an interpreter in their emotion-filled conversation.

sister, who was married with two sons and living in Incheon. Two brothers, both single, living in Seoul.

And suddenly the family portrait shifted: An 87-year-old grandfather, who hadn't been mentioned in my adoption records and hadn't existed to me until that moment, was living in Daebu, the town where I was born.

Then Kim paused. I could almost hear the caution behind his voice. I held my breath. My birth mother, who had abandoned us 26 years before, had also been found. She is remarried and living in Seoul.

I was stunned.

If I had thought my siblings were impossible to relocate, I had always thought that locating my mother was two steps farther than that. So it never had occurred to me to try. Not once. And apparently she was in contact with my older sister, whose name I had not known. Suddenly my sister was one phone call away.

The Korean Ministry of Trading and Foreign Affairs, who received my search inquiry from the Korean Consulate General's Seattle office, determined that it had "come to be impossible" to locate my three siblings.

But Kim and Lieutenant Kwon proved the ministry wrong.

Kim had become my big brother by chance. I was seeking an interpreter for my pending trip to South Korea and he unraveled a bureaucracy.

When a colleague contacted Kim for help, Kim said I needed more than an interpreter, I needed someone who understood Korea's child welfare system. Luckily, he said, he was that someone.

I was a bundle of nervous momentum when we met, more eager than any child at Christmas dawn. I had an expert -- someone who had been a social worker in Korea -- in front of me and he was reading my case history.

He laughed, his eyes dancing as I repeatedly interrupted him to pepper him with questions and said, "I must read through your whole file first."

"Of course," I said, also laughing at my eagerness. I waited a few moments, watching him read line by line.

"See this name here?" he said, pointing to Dr. Kim Duk Whang, president of Eastern Child Welfare Society who was appointed my legal guardian while we were in the care of his adoption agency. "He was my father's best friend. Their names were very similar and they would tease each other about who was the younger brother."

Kim beamed and said, "You have a very good story and I will help you."

I beamed back. This was the closest link, the best lead I had ever had.

I rushed over to my boss and declared: "I've just hit the lottery."

But even though Kim had established a personal connection to my case, I told myself that the most I could hope for was that the trail wasn't cold, that Kim could connect me to someone who could lead me one step closer. I had no idea I was at marathon mile 26 and the finish line was just a breath away.

Less than 36 hours after that meeting, Kim picked up the phone and called me in the middle of the night.

Catching myself

Growing up, I didn't feel my identity was in doubt. I knew I was an American girl who was Korean. The only confusion I had about being adopted was why all the other kids in class also weren't adopted. Wasn't that the way it worked? What was wrong with those kids?

But I did feel a fracture, a disconnect between life before age 3 1/2 and since. Because that's when the paper trail begins, where the photo albums begin, where my life begins -- my American life with a new name, a new family, a new birth certificate.

And I felt like it made me an impostor, a liar. I was living a charmed life in America, but in ways I felt I didn't deserve it -- this life that offered so much more than I assumed my Korean family had. I was the Frank Abagnale Jr. of my life -- with my Luxembourgian name and a Minnesota lilt -- and I was hoping to catch up with myself.

Even simple questions led to lies. Ask me how many siblings I have and I'll have to do the math; do I tell the long version or the short? Most often I told the short version -- two sisters -- and felt like a liar.

I felt I was about to connect both stories and find answers: How did I get got those scars on the back of my head? Do my Korean siblings even remember me? They were 6, 10 and 13 years old when Lindsay and I left. How did that shape their lives?

Within 36 hours of Kim's call, Lindsay flew to Seattle so we could call our sister in Korea together.

A crew of us assembled for the call, including interpreters and documenters. I was nervous as I leaped into the unknown.

It began with photographs. Kwon e-mailed photos of my family from the National Identification List.

First was my paternal grandfather. Lindsay and I stared. I had trouble seeing anyone other than a stranger. Until I saw his dimples.

"He has dimples just like you," I exclaimed to Lindsay.

And suddenly I saw other things. She has his eyes, his nose, the outline of his face.

Then a sister. And I could see a version of Lindsay there as well.

A brother. "Oh, he wears glasses just like us," I said.

And our mother. And in her, I saw myself. Her jaw was the one on which I rested my hands. Her cheekbones the ones I highlighted.

A distant call to childhood

The call to Korea was late.

"I can't thank God enough that you're still alive," my older sister said, through an interpreter.

Despite a language barrier, she communicated perfectly when her voice broke. Lindsay was soon in tears as well. When we hadn't called at the designated time, each minute became an eternity until our older sister was sure "something went wrong."

Her name is Kim Jong Sook. Her voice is sweet, somehow of goodness like summertime.

At first the three of us were speechless. We had thought of questions to ask, but now they now seemed inappropriate or superficial. Where do you start to fill in 25 years?

We started with childhood.

Jong Sook, whose name I had not known until that week, told us how the three of us played together -- we didn't have many toys and our brothers were in school, she explained; how my twin would follow me around, catching my sniffles as she went; how the younger twin had a chubby face and the older twin had a thinner face so everyone thought the older twin was prettier.

"That's me," I exclaimed, the memory returning. "I'm the chubby one!"

We all laughed, especially me because I knew Lindsay had momentarily forgotten she was older. (I had spent so many years both bossing and caring for her that she was known as the younger twin until we were about 9 and we read our adoption records more carefully.)

Jong Sook clarified our history. The five of us lived with our grandfather -- not our uncle, as we had thought -- after our mother left. We were split up after Grandfather remarried in 1978. The three oldest remained with Grandfather and Lindsay and I went to an orphanage.

"When did Mother come back?" I asked.

Lee Soon Nam, our birth mother, had visited Daebu, and left her phone number in case Jong Sook wanted to contact her. It was four years after Lindsay and I were adopted, five years after she had left. When Jong Sook graduated from elementary school, she traced Soon Nam's address through the number. She said the whole family now celebrates holidays together.

Jong Sook said she had been looking for us.

"Do you remember the boat?" she asked. "Uncle took you on a boat."

It was the last time she saw us, the day we disappeared from her life. She tried to trace us through our uncle, but "it didn't work out."

"When is your birthday?" Jong Sook asked.

Instantly there was confusion after we told her. She spoke and the translators asked her more questions and Lindsay and I looked around waiting for someone to explain.

She doesn't think that's your right birthday, the commissioner said. She thinks you are older.

Despite some inaccuracies of our adoption records there was enough that proved true --about grinding our teeth at night, that Lindsay was having difficulty adjusting to the babies' home and was depressed, that I enjoyed snacks -- that we believed most of the report.

We could pinpoint things in the adoption records that were deniable: that Lindsay knew how to draw, do "easy errands well," play games and dance -- all of which she excels at now, but my parents laughingly learned wasn't the case then; or that we spoke Korean when in fact we spoke our own twin language. But we considered them exaggerations rather than lies.

As Jong Sook's stories loosened memory, it also shook loose doubt on what I had known as truth. There were so many new questions.

And now that I knew I was going to meet my Korean family I wondered whether I was prepared to walk into the past. Is there a certain résumé that you must have completed to be worthy to stand before the family who gave you up, let you go, because their hopes for your future were greater than their sorrow or fears?

Tuesday, August 19, 2003

A moment with ... Elliott Kim, state Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Commissioner Elliott Kim of the State of Washington Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs became the crucial link to reunite two American women with their Korean family. Born in Seoul, he came to the United States about 20 years ago "for a better life and opportunity for my family." Kim and his wife, Sylvia, a clinical pharmacologist, have a son, Mitchell, 16. They live in Dupont.

Why did you start in social work: "I had a lot of influence from my parents even when I was young. My father is a very historical man for Korean social work service. People

call him a founding father for Korean National Social Work Service. He was an active participant of establishment of Daegu University in southern Korea. He was a professor, a pastor and social worker. He is a founder of the Daegu Social Work Foundation and he donated almost all of his money to that, which currently I'm a member of the board of trustees."

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Elliott Kim explains to Courtnay, left, and Lindsay Peifer about their family tree on the Internet. Kim is the man who helped find Courtnay and Lindsay's biological family in South Korea.

How many reunion cases have you been involved with: "A long time ago, we had an orphan shelter and day care center. My parents helped support over 400 orphans for long-term care (over 10 years). I used to observe an uncountable amount of reunions ... I actively helped several dozens of cases."

What advice would you give Korean adoptees?: "I would tell them to please understand that their relatives may have great guilt because they left their offspring. I would tell them to respect their family's psychological feelings."

What philosophy do you live by?: "Meeting is the greatest theme of all human beings' existence. ... Karma is one of the most important aspects of human life."

Other comments: "I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all the adopting parents. Their heartbreaking dedication, sacrifice and love has changed hundreds of thousands of young adoptees' lives for the better. I want to say as Koreans, some of our people have neglected, abused, abandoned, or had to give away their children and many Americans gave up something in order to show them unconditional love. This is one of the 20th century's greatest accomplishments. ... In my opinion, all adopting American parents are heroes."

Tuesday, August 19, 2003

A moment with ... Lt. Kwon Teh-il, Korean National Police

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Korean National Police Lt. Kwon Teh-il, a 29-year police veteran, is the section chief of the white-collar crimes unit at Daegu West Metropolitan Police Department. Kwon and his wife have three children.

How many families have you helped reunite? "Uncountable, but I recently helped a grandma in Los Angeles find her granddaughter in Korea and helped a third-generation Korean Chinese who was looking for relatives in South Korea."

Is navigating through the system complex for anyone or just foreigners? "The most important thing is to have accurate clues and information. For foreigners, it may be a little difficult because many times their Korean National ID number and adoption records aren't remaining, so their family information may be unknown. But even if it's a very old record, if they have just a little accurate clue, it will be helpful."

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay Peifer thanks Lt. Kwon Teh-il for finding her Korean family as she says goodbye to him at the police station in Daegu, Korea. It took Kwon three hours to locate Courtnay and Lindsay's family.

Would a Korean national understand how to navigate the system to locate relatives without official help? "Korean Broadcast System has a special family search program called 'Ahchim Madang' every Wednesday from 8:30-9:30 a.m. which has a section called 'Missing them.' There are also such Internet search sites as: www.esan.co.kr, www.bogopa.co.kr, www.mannam.co.kr, www.reunion.unikorea.go.kr."

What philosophy do you live by: "Thinking positively and willingness to help others."

How were you able to locate the Kims: "The problem was, all of them didn't reside in the address that was in the Police Identification List and nobody listed their home phone numbers in their name. Due to the fact that they don't reside in the address listed, the Ministry of Trading and Foreign Affairs couldn't track them. I expanded my search to their marital partners and finally, I was successful."

Other comments: "First of all, as a Korean, I want to show much of my appreciation to Courtnay and Lindsay's American parents who cared for them greatly. Please don't forget your parents, and I hope because of the reunion opportunity you can share your love with your entire family."

-- Courtnay Peifer

Part Three

Wednesday, August 20, 2003

Emotion-filled family reunion for twins

By COURTNAY PEIFER
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

SEOUL -- I now remember what my heart would not forget.

"I'm sorry we were poor," my 87-year-old grandfather told me through his tears. "I've been missing you a lot. I have lived a long life and I have been waiting for you to return."

"We've finally come back," my twin sister, Lindsay, said, her voice breaking.

I sobbed. I had no words to offer as I knelt before him and he clutched my hand. I felt the impact of 25 years without him, not even knowing that I missed him, spill out and I couldn't stop crying.

And Grandfather cried.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Lindsay and Courtnay Peifer, right, arrive at Inchon International Airport, holding signs that bear their Korean names, nearly 25 years after they left.

LINDSAY AND I landed at Korea's Incheon International Airport after nearly 14 hours of travel, after nearly 25 years away from the land of our birth.

When I walked out of customs, the lights seemed too bright. I held up my sign, orange construction paper that had my Korean and American names written in Korean characters, waiting to be claimed. I heard the shouting first.

I strained to look beyond the roped-off area and saw a group of people jockeying to reach Lindsay and me.

I stared at a woman and asked who she was. It was the first time I had seen my mother in more than 26 years. We looked at each other awkwardly. I was facing a stranger; she was facing the daughter she abandoned. I patted her back uncertainly.

My older sister Jong Sook embraced me and held my hand. I smiled, but could not remember her. I met her husband and her two children, ages 5 and 13.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Through tears, Lindsay, left, and Courtnay Peifer are reunited with their grandfather on Daebu Island, where they were born. As the family elder, it was up to him to give up the two youngest grandchildren for adoption.

I hugged a man who looked liked me, assuming it was my brother Jong Pil because he looked too young to be Jong Seong, who is 10 years my senior. Kyun Bo Ra, the 21-year-old cousin of my brother-in-law, stepped up to interpret. She said it was Jong Seong.

"Where is Jong Pil?" I asked her.

"He could not come because of his busy-ness," she said.

I wondered whether that was a euphemism to explain that he did not want to meet.

Jong Sook invited us to her home in Incheon, explaining that it was small.

"We do not care about that," Lindsay and I both assured her.

At my sister's house, we gathered in a circle on the floor in the living room. Tonight, it would serve as a bedroom for five women -- and my 5-year-old nephew Chae Hyun -- sleeping side by side on floor mats. My brother, brother-in-law and 13-year-old nephew, Chae Gun, would sleep in the office past the kitchen. A small bathroom completed the apartment.

Incheon is a bustling city, but a rooster still crowed at dawn. Even though we had been awake for more than 26 hours, Lindsay and I woke at 4 a.m.

"The sun's almost out," Lindsay whispered. "We can see our first sunrise in Korea."

WE DROVE TO Daebu Island, about two hours south of Incheon, to meet the man who raised me and my four siblings after my father died. At the time, I was nearly 2 and my mother had gone.

My grandfather cried as he expressed his gratitude for my adoptive parents in Minnesota, who had given my sister and me the education and the opportunity that he had wished for us when he had us taken to an orphanage in 1978.

He cried as he gave thanks for living long enough to see his son's daughters return. He cried even as he tried to comfort me, telling me, "Don't cry. Don't cry."

Even through my tears, Grandfather could see how years of love in the United States had molded me, had made my heart warm and my smile bright.

Lindsay and I showed him pictures of our childhood: Scenes at a sandbox surrounded by grass; of Raggedy Ann and Alice in Wonderland Halloween costumes (straight black bangs escaping from a yellow wig); of proudly holding up a U.S. flag on the day we became citizens.

I had been nervous to see Grandfather's reaction. I am no longer a Korean citizen and can no longer speak the language. I am not married, a fact that agitated my aunts who had gathered to meet us in Daebu.

What alarmed Grandfather, however, was that Lindsay and I live half a country apart, in Minneapolis and in Seattle.

"But you were raised together?" he implored through an interpreter. "You had the same parents?"

"Yes, yes," we reassured him. "We were raised together in Minnesota."

He smiled with relief. "I am proud of you," he said.

What gift, what honor could be greater than those words?

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Lee Soon Nam, Courtnay and Lindsay's mother, abandoned the family when the twins were 2 years old. Here she sits in Grandfather's house, her former home. After she left, Grandfather cared for her five children, and was forced to give up two for adoption.

In a two-year span, Grandfather watched his wife die. Their oldest son, my father, suffered the ravages of a fatal snakebite. He tried to pick up the pieces when his son's wife ran away, leaving him with five children. He saw his two-room house bear the burden of those five children, and later, his youngest son and his wife and their five children. As the family elder, he bore the responsibility of giving up the two youngest grandchildren because he could not afford to keep us and wanted something more for us than he could offer.

Grandfather no longer had to wonder; he had made the right choice.

THE KIM FAMILY'S fortunes had changed in the past 25 years.

At one point, the family owned much of the land surrounding Grandfather's house on Daebu Island, including the mountain behind the house.

But parcel after parcel had been sold through the years, and what land remains in the family, my oldest uncle has toiled into prosperity.

Uncle Hyeon Bae and his wife have built a seven-bedroom house, vast and ornate.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Worn out after a long day, Courtnay, brother Jong Seong and 13-year-old nephew Chae Gun, look up at the television screens in a restaurant in Seoul.

Koreans traditionally gather on the floor, eating on low tables and sleeping on mats. But Uncle has included Western-style beds in the upstairs bedrooms.

Uncle has rows and rows of grapevines, a yard filled with butterflies and corn taller than me. He proudly points out his plum tree, which I climb after he beckons me to gather some fruit.

My father's three siblings led Lindsay and me along a gravel road, passing rice paddies, green like bursting buds of spring. We walked to a narrow path, potholed and muddy, that leads to my grandfather's house, the house in which I was born and in which my father died.

The yard is overgrown with melon vines and the metal roof seems to be leaning in. My aunt shows us a small dirt patch along the side where Lindsay and I -- who are called Soon and Sun here -- used to play.

The house is bare. This small expanse is little more than a rectangle bisected with one area for a kitchen and the other for meeting and sleeping. There is no furniture, no evidence that time has passed here. Even the black-and-white photographs on the wall -- combined in one frame -- are 30 years old. This is where the past and the present collide.

This room is exactly how I remember it. It is small and dark and safe. This is the place of my clearest memories, to where I returned in my dreams as a child.

We went back to my uncle's house, where my grandfather walks each day for his meals.

Korean families often eat in shifts, so Lindsay and I ate with Grandfather as many of the extended family, about 30 of whom had gathered to meet us, chatted on the outskirts of the room.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay compares hands with her brother, Jong Seong, as they wait for a taxi in the hotel lobby. Jong Seong, the oldest child, is the family historian.

It was a banquet. Barbequed octopus, bulgolgi, chop chae, crab and squid soup, radishes, kimchi and other side dishes.

Halfway through the meal, I noticed Grandfather's eyes start tearing. And I realized the day was drawing to a close.

Brushing his eyes with his handkerchief, he looked away and said, "I would like to see you again before you leave Korea."

"When can we come back?" I asked.

"Tomorrow," he said no longer able to prevent his tears from spilling over.

That night, back in Seoul, I thought about what my grandfather gave up and what he received in his life.

He has lost most of his teeth and eats his rice in a bowl of hot water. He chuckles softly as he watches the room fill up with his sons and daughters and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He has lost much of his hearing and speaks softly but must endure shouting to hear. He has lived long enough to see his son's daughters return. He has worn away

his joints from a lifetime of fishing and walks with two wooden canes. He has a heart so full and deep that he can move a room to tears.

MY 38-YEAR-OLD brother, Jong Seong, is stoic and patient while my sister Jong Sook, 31, and her husband, Junho, tell story after animated story. But it is Jong Seong who is the family historian, the keeper of the memories.

"I remember you were in a car accident," he said quickly.

Jong Sook suddenly remembers, too, and finishes the story: Lindsay and I were about 2 years old and were walking with her and Mother to the market.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

The Kim family gathers to welcome home Jong Sun and Jong Soon, Courtnay, left, and Lindsay, right, at their uncle's home in Daebu.

"We were crossing the street and a dump truck hit you," she said. "You were rushed to a hospital and had an operation. We were all really worried about you."

"Yes, you had surgery on your head," Jong Seong added.

I have often wondered about those scars above the nape of my neck, which Mom would cover up with lopsided ponytails in my childhood to prevent them from showing. I must have fallen, I imagined, as I traced the smooth patch with my fingers.

I wasn't the only one with questions.

"I was always wondering where you were," my 34-year-old brother Jong Pil said when Lindsay and I later met him and Jong Seong for lunch in Seoul. "Whenever I looked at (pictures of) you, I wondered."

"Do you remember the day we left?" I asked.

"No," Jong Pil said. "We just came home from school and you weren't there."

"How about Mother?" I asked. "What did she tell you before she left?"

"She didn't say anything," Jong Seong said. "We went to school and we came back and she was gone."

Meryl Schenker / P-I

After seeing Courtnay with a French braid, her sister Jong Sook, 31, asked Courtnay to braid her hair too at Jong Sook's apartment in Inchon.

The weight of it hit me. I had gained so much; my siblings, who work 12-hour days, six days a week, had lost so much. And it explained why Jong Pil had not been at Incheon International Airport when Lindsay and I returned to Korea; he is seldom where Soon Nam, my birth mother, is.

HERE IS THE TRUTH: I never wanted to meet my birth mother.

I did not long for her, did not hope for her or carry secret wishes about her. I have a mother in Minnesota and she is the only one I need.

Soon Nam was the mother I did not want, the one who had not wanted me. Her abandonment meant I was given a different life so I had no reason to be angry with her -- until I met my brothers.

What does it do to children to watch their father's skin turn yellow in death? What happens when a year later, the boys, ages 12 and 8, watch their grandmother die in the same two-room house, a house still filled with mourning? And then, amid that anguish, their mother leaves them without a word?

And how long did they search and call out for their baby sisters -- whom they carried on their backs, whom they tried to protect as surrogate parents for a year -- when the toddlers were taken to the orphanage while they were at school?

As Jong Seong and Jong Pil told me these stories, I mourned their lost childhoods, crying out for the 25 years I have tried not to cry.

"I'm not angry," Lindsay said. "I'm just uncomfortable around her."

"Not me," I said. "I'm angry and I'm going to be fine with that."

I'm angry that Soon Nam left my brothers motherless. I'm angry that they carry the scars of her choices. I'm angry that she left without a word and came back five years later without an apology, without an explanation, without contrition.

When I confessed my anger to Jong Seong, his light brown eyes widened with concern.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because she abandoned you and Jong Pil and Jong Sook and Lindsay and me. Because I blame her for us being split up," I said, partly in English and partly in the Korean I had been acquiring.

"Ah," he said, his face relaxing with clarity as he embraced me.

"How do you feel?" I asked him.

After a pause, he said in English, "I don't know. I don't know."

Wednesday, August 20, 2003

Thoughts and musings on finding family, roots

By LINDSAY PEIFER
SPECIAL TO THE POST-INTELLIGENCER

DAEBU ISLAND, South Korea -- I held the hand of my 87-year-old grandfather today.

It is darkly tanned, weathered and is roughly the size as my own. In this hand, I have a physical link to the father I once had, to the house I once lived in, to the life I once owned.

Grandfather has a beautiful smile despite the few teeth still present in it.

He cannot hear very well but his eyes are sharp and he understands the traditional Korean bow, a bow Courtnay and I have learned only hours earlier in front of our father's ashes.

At this moment I am unsure how long to keep my head on the floor. How long is appropriate to show respect for a man who tried to raise us after our father's death, after our mother's disappearance?

We are surrounded by aunts, uncles, cousins and their children but all our attention is on the source of this circle, this grandfather seated in front of us. He says he wants to hold our hands.

"I have been missing you a lot," he says. "I am sorry we were poor, we did not have very much money. I have lived a long life, a good life, and I have lived long enough to see you come back, which makes me want to live longer."

"We have finally come back," I say.

Common links

Jong Seong and Jong Pil hold our hands as we walk and see the sights of Seoul.

Jong Seong is quiet and thoughtful, making his sudden bursts of silliness all the funnier. He is the "keeper of the memories," as Courtnay says. Courtnay, too, is the historian in our family. She often retells memories I have long forgotten.

Jong Pil is expressive and animated but there are moments that he is so serious that I wonder what sad thoughts he is mulling over. In him, I see myself. Often I am transparent, experiencing the event in front of me with extreme emotion. But, when I am thinking, a cloudy darkness takes over my face, often making me appear angry even when I am not.

Picky eaters unite

In America, my being a vegetarian is a luxury that I have chosen. It is often a nuisance for others because I am so picky.

I worried about this before coming to Korea, knowing that we would be eating in people's homes. The day after we arrived, Jong Seong said he, too, was a vegetarian.

He says it was because we had no money when we were young.

Everyone laughs.

Meet the parents

Jong Seong watches Court's expression as she talks to Mom on the phone.

When we make him talk to Mom, he protests, saying that he doesn't speak English -- a fact that didn't stop him from making me talk to countless people over the phone in the Korean I don't speak.

We shout: "Just say hi, just say hi."

Mom asks him if he is enjoying our visit. Court translates it into one word -- showing our routine in communication -- "Happy?" she says.

"Yes, very happy," he tells Mom.

We call Dad at work. We talk about the noodles and the land. He has been forwarding our e-mails to relatives at home, and he relays their love to us.

Someday, I hope to come again with Mom and Dad. In the meantime, we continue to communicate any way we can, bridging countries, families and lives through stories, a few tears and lots of laughter that encircles us all.

Beautiful moments

Family. It is the root of all of us. It is our foundation. Yet, where is the line drawn?

In my youth, my family consisted of Mom, Dad, Ashley and Courtnay in a house by a Minnesota lake.

As an adult, the line extended outward as our friends become our families.

Now, here is another family half a world away. How do they fit? How does one "keep in touch" with someone that doesn't read or write or speak the same tongue?

As we drive away, I long for home and the silence of a morning spent in my rocking chair on my porch drinking tea.

And yet, as I watch as my nephew climb on my lap and take my pen to draw, I return to the present and the beauty of the luck that exists in every moment. When he is done, he quietly kisses my arm and crawls to the seat in front of me to jump around between Courtnay, my cousin Bryan, and his mom. This two minutes of drawing is the only time he is quiet the whole ride home.

Wednesday, August 20, 2003

With one phone call -- lives forever altered

By COURTNAY PEIFER
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

When I hung up the phone with Commissioner Elliott Kim, it was 2:45 a.m., 4:45 a.m. in Minnesota where my twin sister, Lindsay, and my parents live. I started pacing.

The search for my Korean family had taken years, what was a few more hours? It's going to be a shock so they might as well hear it on a good night's sleep.

Lindsay's a high school teacher and even though it's summer recess, I knew she would be awake early. I gave her until 7 a.m.

"Are you sure they found the right people?" Lindsay asked.

"I don't know," I said, "apparently Lieutenant Kwon looked them up on the Police Identification List and found them through our sister's in-laws. He's already spoken with our sister. "Apparently she's excited to meet us. She gave Lieutenant Kwon her cell phone number and now I have it."

"Does she speak English?" Lindsay asked. "Uh, I don't know," I said. Giddy with sleep-deprivation and excitement, I next called Mom and Dad.

"Outstanding!" Dad said, when I told him. I could just see his big grin. "Tell your mother."

"I'm nervous for my girls," Mom said after hearing the details. "I'm excited for you, but I'm nervous for my girls. I know you'll be fine. If anyone can do this and be fine, it's you two."

I could hear Dad in the background. "When you come back, everything here will still be the same."

I knew what Dad meant and I was glad that he knew. When I came back from Korea, I'd be coming home. My family -- my real family in the United States -- would still be there, would still love me, would still be home.

But at the same time, things were suddenly altered. And as a testament of family, perhaps, this discovery affected all of us -- except for Dad, who was as even-keeled as ever.

Mom began having dreams that Lindsay and I went to Korea and didn't come back.

Lindsay flew to Seattle so we could call our sister in Korea and try to process something so large, nebulous and unexpected that we felt we could only tackle the task together.

I walked around in a daze, trying to hug everyone who came near me. I felt that the discovery was so significant that surely everyone could see it on my face.

But I was quickly checked by reality. When Lindsay and I contacted Ashley, our sister in Glendale, Ariz., fear overflowed.

Ashley, who is a year older than us and is a creative director at a hair salon, was adopted two years before Lindsay and me. She had been left on a doorstep in South Korea and doctors guessed an approximate age and birth date according to her teeth and a so-called blue spot, a birthmark that looks like a bruise on the lower back that all Koreans and some other ethnic groups are born with. Because the mark fades within a few years, it can help pinpoint age.

Ashley has never wanted to go back to Korea. "What would I go back to?" she asked when we called to tell her that our family had been found.

Ashley wept. She wept for her lost past, over fears that our newly found siblings might squeeze her out of our lives, for our sisterhood weakened by years and miles.

Ashley flew here, and three sisters were reunited. I hadn't seen her in more than a year and hadn't had much time with her since before she got married three years ago.

And over the course of several days, we remembered each other and the beauty of the human heart, boundless and limitless.

Wednesday, August 20, 2003

Short Takes: Rules of the road

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER STAFF

Here are the rules in Seoul: Pedestrians must avoid cars and motorcycles whether the vehicles are driving on the road, on the sidewalk or in the crosswalk. The driver's obligation to the pedestrian: They must take any pedestrians they hit -- though it is the pedestrian's responsibility to avoid being hit -- to the hospital.

The favorite gift: American gum.

"The flavor lasts so long," my brother-in-law, Junho, marveled. "Very good."

In five days, we chewed through seven packs -- from sugar-free lemonade bubble gum to peppermint Orbit.

The most appalling thing I brought: Chinese-made shoes.

My brother, a shoe designer, checked my shoe size so my relatives could surprise us with traditional Korean shoes. But my brother also found a tag that read: "Made in China."

He solved the problem, however. When I wasn't looking, he tore the tags out.

-- Courtnay Peifer

Part Four

Thursday, August 21, 2003

One land connects two fathers

By COURTNAY PEIFER
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

DAEBU ISLAND, South Korea -- A farmer dies, and a soldier survives to take his place.

Two fathers cleaved by half a world, but their fates intersect in Korea.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Lindsay Peifer, Kim Jong Sook and Courtnay Peifer, from left to right, bow at their father's grave, in Umsong. Korean pears, melons -- with tops and bottoms sliced off so they could reach their ancestors -- dried fish and wine are laid out in homage.

Bob Peifer served as an officer on U.S. Army bases in Korea in 1968 and 1969. It was the Vietnam War era, and Dad had an unlucky draft number. It was inevitable that he would serve, but he enlisted to try to manage his destiny. Later, his 17-year-old brother enlisted and chose a tour in Vietnam -- which would become two tours -- to spare his older brothers, who already had families of their own.

Dad was sent to Korea. The uneasy armistice was 15 years old, yet daily gunfire and brinkmanship at the demilitarized zone were routine.

Heightened by the war in Vietnam, the atmosphere was electric. The USS Pueblo was seized by North Korea in January 1968, and the crew was held hostage for 11 months; a North Korean plane shot down a U.S. Navy EC-121 surveillance plane in April 1969, killing all 31 Americans aboard.

While Dad was serving in Siheung, about an hour south my birth father was farming on the island of Daebu. Kim Wan Bae and his wife, Lee Soon Nam, had a 3-year-old son and a newborn son.

Less than 10 years after Dad was safely home in Minnesota, Kim Wan Bae would be dead and the Kim family -- five kids by this time -- would scatter. The Peifer family would pick up the pieces.

One father's death

Perhaps Kim Wan Bae did not believe that death had come for him that day when he was farming in the fields. Perhaps it was instinct that made him cling to life for another nine months, or perhaps he didn't know how not to fight.

Even as the poison coursed through his blood, he wrestled the magpie snake that bit him, caught it and killed it.

A neighbor came running, and tried to suck out the poison from my father's leg. But the poison sickened the neighbor as well and his mouth was swollen for three days before he recovered.

Father's infection advanced, his body swelling as the poison spread to his torso and gradually hardened his liver. He was moved to a hospital, but did not improve. He returned to Daebu, to the house in which my grandfather still lives, on Dec. 29, 1976. He died the next day.

They moved his body, his lips glistening with blood and his skin yellowed, from the house in a wheelbarrow. And they buried him in his chestnut orchard in the mountains behind the house.

Father had toiled the mountainside, clearing existing trees and digging up the roots so he could plant his chestnut trees. He pounded away at the earth to build his legacy. And though he died before he was able to plant his 1,000 trees, 800 of them still stand tall.

Many of the trees seem forgotten, crowded by foliage and lined with overgrown webs guarded by spiders the size of quarters. But I can't help noticing as I rest against the embrace of the highest branches that the weaving boughs look as though they are dancing, as if in silent thanksgiving to the sky.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay hugs Lindsay after looking through their childhood records at the Sung Ro Won Babies Home in Seoul, the orphanage where they stayed before they were placed with an adoption agency.

Father's body no longer rests among his trees. When the family sold the mountain, the new landowners requested that his body be moved.

Today, Father's ashes are at a state cemetery in Umsong, about three hours south of Seoul. The plots are built into a mountainside, and everywhere there are quiet gravestones climbing toward the heavens. My brother-in-law drives us upward, weaving as if climbing a pyramid.

The family gathered to pay homage to his ashes with apples and melons -- first cutting off the tops and bottoms so they could reach our ancestors -- dried fish and wine. First, my brother bowed before his ashes and then my brother-in-law. Next, my twin sister, Lindsay, my sister Jong Sook and I stood in a line, dropping to the ground in unison. We pressed our foreheads to the ground, then stood to repeat the bow once more.

I tried to make sense of this ceremony, reverent but conducted on a mat decorated with the Garfield and Odie comic strip characters. It is just one such intermingling of the past with the present, an odd intersection of images.

Another father falls in love

Much of what I learned about Korea -- the beauty of its mountains and the sweetness of its people -- came from my American dad. And it was his stories, his memories and his photographs that created a bridge between two cultures and two families.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay peers in at children during their visit to the Sung Ro Won Babies Home. Her lone memory of the place was of standing in one of the hallways, where she sobbed as a 3-year-old after getting vaccination shots.

"I was scared to death," Mom said. "I would never have adopted from Korea had your father not gone there and fallen in love with the people and the culture."

Dad served at two U.S. missile bases while in Korea: Siheung, about an hour north of my birthplace and Youngsan, about an hour north of my father's grave.

Youngsan is rural and rests in the mountainous countryside. Siheung is the opposite. The city feels industrial and the humid heat rises from the concrete in a hazy ricochet.

Today there are no reminders of an international presence in Siheung, and nearly no reminders of a base. Golden shards of glass litter the tops of the brick walls, as clear a warning to would-be trespassers as the corresponding barbed wire. There are Korean sentinels and black and yellow roadblocks, but it feels like a façade, like the soldiers are guarding an empty safe.

The most striking distinction between the past and the present is in Seoul.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Lindsay and Courtnay look through their records. They debated whether the two photos were actually the same, showing the same child twice.

Dad's introduction to the city was at the Han River bridge, under which I drank Coca-Cola and watched in-line skaters and lazy-paced bicyclers in the warm river breeze.

Thirty-five years ago, this same bridge told a different story. Riding toward the city, Dad saw something hanging from the bridge. It was a man's body, the body of a North Korean infiltrator who had tried to assassinate President Park Chung Hee in his residence, the Blue House. He had been hanged above the city as an example of what would happen to other would-be assassins.

"It had been hanging there about a week by the time I saw it," Dad said. "But you have to remember it was a different time then."

It was a time when they conducted war games on the islands in the river, which is known today as the "lifeline of Seoul."

Old and new memories

There are threads that connect different families and different eras.

Returning to visit the Seoul orphanage where I once lived, I imagine what Dad must have felt seeing an orphan reach out to him those many years ago, just as I could imagine myself being that child as I enter the nursery school-looking structure.

I remember the hallway.

"Would I have gotten my vaccinations here?" I ask.

"Yes," the guide says.

The hallway is the only thing I remember about the orphanage. This is where I sobbed after getting my shots.

Lindsay has a happier memory; she remembers the trees. "Yes, those trees would have been there when you were here," the guide tells her.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay Peifer, at a DMZ sculpture that depicts reunification, finds her own reunification -- of her family, of the past and present, and of different parts of the world coming together.

When we walk upstairs, we are bombarded by children. They are clamoring with arms held high, desperate for attention and urging me to pick them up. But when I greet some of them, they grow fearful. Some run away and others kick and scream.

One girl, about 3 years old with wide and serious brown eyes, approaches me, clearing her way through the crowd of eager toddlers. I squat down to be closer to her. She looks into my eyes and says something. I don't understand the words, but the intention is clear: She is making a declaration.

She raises her arms to me. I think she is going to hug me, but I am wrong.

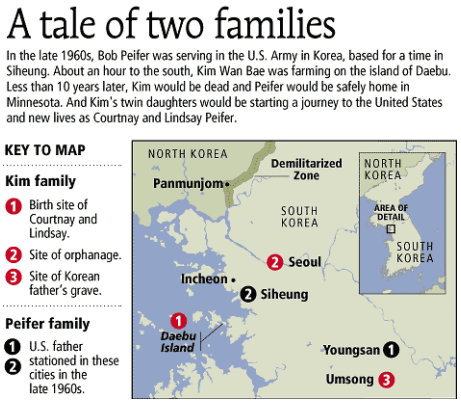
She reaches up to the top button of my sweater. It takes her three tries as the delicate pearly button slips past her fingers, but she concentrates, biting her lip, and at last she succeeds. She has gotten the button through the buttonhole.

I am impressed; at age 3 I managed buttons by simply tearing them off and ended up wearing snaps and zippers.

She surprises me again. After completing the top button, she moves to the next. It is a struggle, but she buttons it

faster this time. She pats the button and sighs, as if saying that is enough for one day.

And she is right. My brother takes my hand, beckoning that it's time to leave. I look at the girl, who most likely will not remember me but whom I will never forget. She doesn't see me take one last glance.



Thursday, August 21, 2003

Short Takes: Can't sleep? Go shopping

Dongdaemun, or "east big gate," comes from the era when Seoul was protected by walls and guards watched over the city at stone gates. Today, it has shopping centers -- about 30,000 vendors -- open until 8 a.m.

Prepare to be jostled. Not that I had to fight for that silk dress with the satin ribbon; it's not a free-for-all. There is simply so much variety and so many shoppers in the narrow aisles that it creates a heightened level of competition. It's certainly not the friendliest place in Seoul, but the prices and selection almost are worth the attitude.

Work up an appetite? Walk across the street and find coffee shops and noodle restaurants ready to appease the munchies. At 2 a.m., we stopped for hot rice cake, which is an iron pan filled with ramen, cabbage, carrots, wontons and spices that simmers over a burner on the table. Add udon noodle soup, kimbap -- sticky rice and vegetables rolled in seaweed -- and kimchi and we stumbled out in gluttonous revelry to our taxi home.

-- Courtnay Peifer

Part Five

Friday, August 22, 2003

Coming home with losses healed

By COURTNAY PEIFER
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

SEOUL -- The Kims are a family of secrets.

A new layer unfolds each day and I wonder what I would learn if I had more time here. But I am glad that I am going home to the United States -- even as I fight to understand the meaning of home.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay Peifer and her brother Jong Pil walk through Samcheong Park in Seoul. Courtnay's return to Korea connected a broken link for her relatives.

I had expected to feel like a foreigner here, to find a sense of my Americanism. Instead, I found comfort and ease in being Korean.

I spent an afternoon wandering the streets of Seoul alone. I know just enough Korean to get myself into trouble, so I bowed slightly and smiled at the beckoning vendors. I walked past restaurant after restaurant in the Dongdaemun neighborhood and my mouth salivated as I took in the sharp smell of kimchi. I knew I would turn the corner, beyond the fruit vendor under the rainbow-striped umbrella and the printing shops and the bakery, and the luggage shop would be there.

I know to dodge crowds on the left side. I know when I go into stores, security guards will not follow me and clerks will not avoid helping me -- as they do in the United States -- because I look different. Here, it is features like mine that appear on billboards, in magazines, on TV.

But a sense of belonging goes beyond commercial images. It connects to the land, feasting from the Earth as I sank my fingers into the gooey seafloor to collect clams. It connects to memories of childhood: an orphanage, my grandfather's house, sleeping on the floor. It connects to a legacy held in the embrace of my father's chestnut trees.

"You can go back," Mom said. "Tell your story and let people know that it's possible to return."

What I discovered, however, was how important it was that I return -- not only to better understand myself, but to connect a broken link for my relatives. Lindsay and I have healed a loss and completed a home.

And now it was time to go home to another waiting family to fill in the blanks of our three-week separation from them, to whom I had also inherited a deeper sense of belonging.

"I've never believed in magic as much as I do now," Lindsay said. "It's amazing the outpouring of love we are getting from all over the world, (American) relatives reaching out to us who never have before and whom I never reached out to before."

I realized that I had wandered into a love story. I was humbled by the kindness of strangers and carried by the love Lindsay and I received from friends and family from all over the world -- California, New Mexico, Georgia, Minnesota, Washington, Arizona, New York, Maryland, Ohio, Colorado, Washington, D.C., Hawaii, Michigan, Louisiana, Texas, The Netherlands, China, and of course Korea.

"I miss hearing your voices," Mom e-mailed.

I have missed hers -- Lindsay and I usually talk to her every day. And there are other things I have missed: my independence, my space, my solitude -- all of which come at a price in Korea.

I am an introvert. I require quiet moments to process experiences and contemplate choices. After 10 days of non-stop activity -- often sleeping only a couple of hours a night -- and non-stop chatter, I was yearning for a moment alone.

Later, I made my escape in the shadows of the temples surrounding South Korea's tallest Buddha -- 109 feet high -- in Daegu, about five hours south of Seoul.

I slipped into the bamboo forest, making my way around the slender stalks until I saw a clearing. Strung up in the bamboo was a 6-foot rubber drum. I tapped, and it made a dull thud. I beat it with the bottom of my fist, but still only a dull thud. I spotted a fallen branch nearby, but a different sound caught my attention. It was the sound of water -- the river quickly cutting through the mountain.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay, Lindsay and Jong Seong ride the subway in Seoul. For Courtnay, the feeling of belonging she found in Korea goes beyond shared features to include family, culture and history.

I found a trail and I raced to the water below, only stopping when I was perched on the slick rocks at the water's edge. I washed my hands and slowly raised my fingers to my mouth, unable to resist the temptation to taste just a few drops, so cold and pure.

And then I ran back, slamming my feet into the soft earth as the ruffle of my dress danced around my knees and my heart pounded, exhilarated at the demand. I ran and ran, up the mountainside, past the silent drum and the sea of bamboo, returning to the world as if stepping out of a magical wardrobe.

I bowed reverently at the startled temple patrons, and then rushed past them as well, responding to a new sound, the call of my name -- my Korean one.

"Sun! Sun!"

"Here," I called back.

Kunnoppa, Korean for oldest brother, was the first to start looking for me.

"Sun? Sun?" Jong Seong asked my sister when he could no longer see me.

"I don't know where she is," Lindsay said.

He wandered the grounds, approaching Lindsay again. "Sun? Sun?"

Meryl Schenker / P-I

After visiting Lt. Kwon Teh-il to say thank you for finding their family, Courtnay and Lindsay visit a Buddhist temple.

Soon, Kunnoppa had asked our whole group whether they had seen me.

"Where have you been? Everyone has been looking for you," Lindsay said when I emerged.

I pointed at the forest and looked as the members of my group searched temple to temple. I had been gone only 15 minutes.

I am not used to having such close tabs kept on me, having a search party launched when I go to get coffee by myself.

"Very American?" Jong Seong asked Lindsay about my independence.

I do not understand being led by the wrist or being forced to walk under an umbrella when I am wearing a hooded waterproof jacket. I do not anticipate their chagrin when I stop to help four men -- two Australians, a Briton and a New Zealander -- huddled around a subway map.

The men were in Seoul on a one-night layover before joining an oil surveying rig in Russia. After I helped them plan their day -- Doksu palace and its museum, shopping at Dongdaemun or Namdaemun, a tea house in Insadong and Apeujong's night life -- and showed them which subway lines to take, I returned to my sister and brother's disapproving looks. Then I remembered that I'm in a culture protective of single women.

But these moments of dissonance are just opportunities to find my own way as I navigate through a different culture and a different family.

I have discovered home in the strength of my brothers' shoulders, in the grip of their embrace. I have discovered there are no boundaries on family, no statute of limitations on love.

I also have discovered the Kims are a family of fiery tempers.

"Kim family? No, we're the Kimchi family," joked Jong Seong, comparing our family to the spicy side dish.

We speak in terms of either love or anger. Jong Seong brings a story of both. But it's more than just a story, it is a confession.

"I was drinking by myself by the Han River," he said less than 36 hours before my departure. "My heart is breaking."

"Your heart is big, Oppa," I said, using the Korean title for older brother.

"When I was younger, my heart was big," Oppa said. "But now it grows smaller and smaller."

"No, Oppa. Your heart is still big," I said.

He was quiet for a few seconds and said, "I am sorry."

I was incredulous. He is the one who tries the hardest to communicate, to listen and to get to know his sisters. He has spent nearly every day with us.

"I am the family boss," he said. "I studied English in high school, but it's been 22 years since I've spoken it."

He was right. There are many things left unsaid because we can't communicate certain complexities without a shared language. But he is not to blame.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Myeong-dong-gil lane, a fashion center, has many Western chain stores, including Seattle's Best Coffee, in the heart of downtown Seoul.

"We can't speak Korean," Lindsay said.

"No one knew that we'd ever find you," I said. "It's not your fault."

"Blameless," Lindsay showed him in the electronic dictionary. "You are blameless."

But years of guilt, of blame -- of perhaps shame -- are difficult to erase.

The Kims are a family of farmers, of fishermen, of laborers. Even today, my uncles have lean, defined muscles developed by decades of the earth's physical demands. And Korea is a society based on patriarchy, on men being protectors, on strength.

Brother, the first born, was healthy and strong through his first winter. But by summer, it was apparent that something was wrong with his left arm. Grandfather paid what little money they had on a hospital, but nothing cured his arm.

His shoulder stopped growing and his arm has so little strength that he still can't raise it above his shoulder. Most likely it was polio. But was it taken as an omen for the family?

Jong Seong blames himself for contributing to the family's poverty; for not being able -- despite being a child -- to help support the family after our father died; for not being strong enough to prevent his sisters from being given up.

He also blames himself for not receiving the love of our mother.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

A woman sells vegetables on the street in Seoul, a common sight. Vendors line the streets and each usually specializes in one food: squid, meat, fruits and vegetables.

"Mother never calls me, never says, 'I love you. I love you.' But Sun, Soon come to Korea and she calls and calls to try to get together with you; it's, 'I love you,' 'I love you,' " he says, pointing to Lindsay and me.

Withholding affection from my brothers, she embraced Lindsay and me as prodigal daughters. However, Lindsay and I allowed only limited visits with her to appease our siblings, who yearned for an idyllic reunion. But, for me, this reunion could not be about reclaiming a childhood, long unrecoverable; it was about claiming links from the past to take into the future.

My brother also focused on the future -- but the kind in which days are counted in hours, in which his sisters would be leaving.

"My heart is breaking," he repeated, crying silent tears.

Lindsay bowed before him, sobbing. And the three of us held each other.

"No, no," I said, quickly looking in the Korean-English dictionary. I found the word I was looking for and showed it to Jong Seong.

"Beginning," I said. "This is just the beginning. The beginning. We will see you again."

I repeated it over and over until we are smiling.

This is the beginning. It is no longer an impossible dream. And that has been my greatest discovery: I do not need to believe in the impossible; more things are possible than I ever believed.

TELL US YOUR STORIES

Courtnay Peifer's series has produced an outpouring of response from readers. If you have an adoption experience you would like to pass along, e-mail it to adoption@seattlepi.com. We'll share the best of them with you.

Friday, August 22, 2003

Help for adoptees

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER STAFF

Organizations, support groups and other forums for Korean adoptees:

National Adoption Information Clearinghouse: NAIC is a resource on all aspects of adoption as a service of a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
330 C St. S.W., Washington, D.C. 20447; 703-352-3488 or 888-251-0075 Fax: 703-385-3206
www.calib.com/naic/pubs/ir_kores.cfm

Coalition for Asian American Children and Families: A New York-based organization that supports Asian American children and families by advocating for social policies and programs and gives service providers culturally sensitive training and resources.
120 Wall St., 3rd floor, New York, NY 10005; 212-809-4675
www.cacf.org/

Global Overseas Adoptees' Link: G.O.A.'L is an independent homebase for Overseas Adopted Koreans in their birth country run by adoptees and native Koreans.
K.P.O. Box 1364, Seoul, Korea; 110-61382+2-337-2107
www.goal.or.kr

International Concerns for Children: ICC publishes the Report on Intercountry Adoption, a guidebook to international adoption and U.S. agencies working in specific foreign countries.
911 Cypress Dr., Boulder, CO; 80303; 303-494-8333
www.icc.adopt.org

Joint Council on International Children's Services: The oldest and largest affiliation of licensed, non-profit international adoption agencies in the world. JCICS membership includes parent groups, advocacy organizations, and individuals who have an interest in international adoption.
1320 19th St. N.W., Suite 200, Washington, D.C.; 20036; 202-429-0400
www.jcics.org

Korean-American Adoptee/Adoptive Family Network: Information and resources for Korean and Korean American adoptees, people interested in adopting from Korea and families with children adopted from Korea.
P.O. Box 5585, El Dorado Hills, CA 95762; 915-933-1447
www.KAANet.com

AKConnection (Adopted Korean Connection): A support network for Minnesota Korean adoptees and their families.
12676 74th Ave. N., Maple Grove, MN, 55369
www.akconnection.com/

Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington: AAAW provides mentoring, fellowship and educational opportunities for adoptees of Asian descent and the community.
5415 136th Place S.E., Bellevue, WA 98006; 425-649-9851
E-mail: aaawashington@hotmail.com

U.S. State Department International Adoption (Korea) Web site: Contains information on the policy and procedures of adopting from Korea.
travel.state.gov/adoption_korea.html
Korean Adoptee Homepage: Information on support for Korean adoptees.
www.adoptee.com

Korean Quarterly: An online magazine of Korean culture and information.
www.koreanquarterly.org/

Korean Quarterly: Publication of a non-profit organization to promote Korean American people, issues and culture. Subscription is $12 per year.
P.O. Box 6789, St. Paul, MN, 55106; 651-771-8164
Korean Web Weekly: A Web site on all things Korean.
www.kimsoft.com/Korea.htm

Sae Jong Camp: A camp for Korean American adoptees.
www.sequoianet.com/saejong

SOURCE: National Adoption Information Clearinghouse

Friday, August 22, 2003

Short Takes: Stair masters

I initially wondered how everyone stays so thin in Korea with so much tasty food. Then I hit the subway.

The subway connects much of South Korea and is easy and convenient to use. Signs are marked in English and Korean and each exit includes a neighborhood map.

As simple as the subway is to navigate, it takes some effort. Walk down four flights of at least 12 stairs each to get to the subway level. Take two more flights down to get to the tickets. One or two more flights down to get to the train.

Need to transfer? Take 48 steps up to the transfer level and perhaps a flight of stairs back down to your train. We'd usually transfer one to three times per trip.

Reach your destination? Four flights back up to street level.

But if you misread the maps, which was often my experience, hike back down the stairs, find the way through the subway tunnels to the right direction and hike back up the stairs.

Pedestrians can't cross many of the streets because roads are often congested. Thus, stair master your way back underground and pop back up on the opposite side of the street.

Easily 150 steps. Repeat for return trip.

What's astounding about all of this is that Koreans master all these steps in sandals, slides, mules, pumps and the most delicate of high heels. I stuck with my foamy-soled walking shoes or my Nikes.

As a Seattleite, I'm used to seeing Starbucks on seemingly every block -- or even every half block for that matter. Even in Seoul, the large green letters seemed commonplace amid the flash of other Western giants: KFC, McDonalds, Burger King.

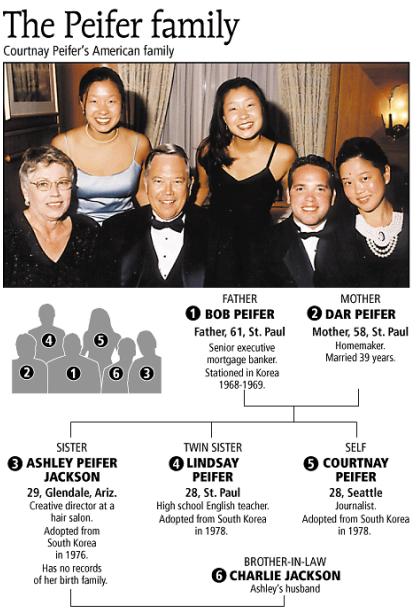
But walking in Insadong, a neighborhood in north central Seoul, the green Starbucks letters stopped me. I recognized the logo on the door, but the letters above it jarred me. And then made me smile.

The letters were in Korean. It's the only Starbucks in the world -- among more than 6,500 branches in 30 countries -- in which the storefront sign is in the native language.

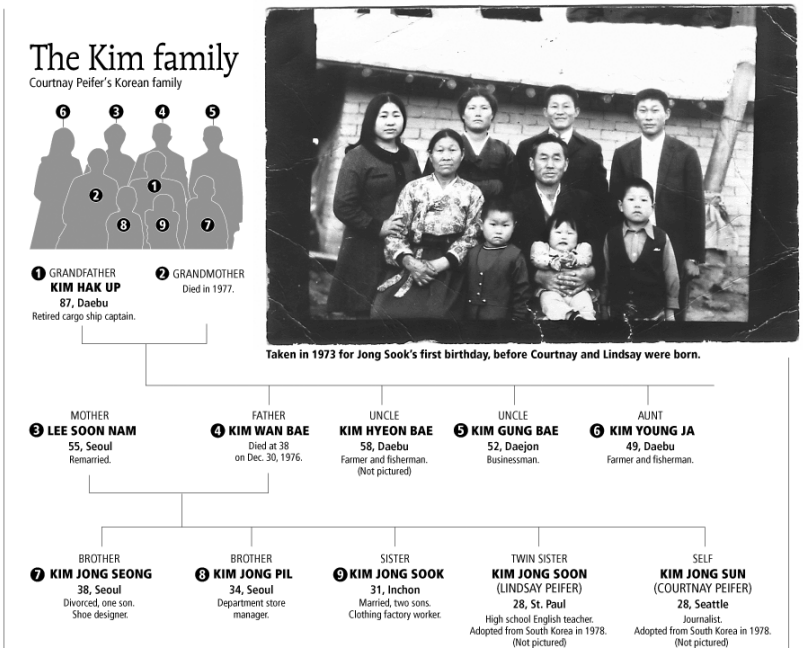
-- Courtnay Peifer

Appendix

A1



A2



RETURN TO TABLE OF CONTENTS